

Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto fights back against heavy odds

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The 10-month-old democratically elected regime in Pakistan has run into serious difficulties. Facing a challenge internally and externally, the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, staged a massive rally in Rawalpindi—the garrison town from which Pakistan's establishment troika of President, military, and civil bureaucracy controls the show—on Sept. 6, the National Defense Day of Pakistan. The rally, according to reports attended by more than 200,000 people, indicates that the PPP and Miss Bhutto can muster strength even in the most difficult terrain under trying conditions.

The show of strength was necessary in light of the full court press that has been applied to Bhutto's government in recent days. Although the coup rumor floated in early September by London's *Financial Times*, most likely part of a deliberate British-style psychological warfare campaign, was quickly brushed aside by both the Pakistan Defense Ministry and the prime minister herself, there is no denying that during the month of August things heated up considerably. According to the *Herald*, a monthly news journal published in Karachi, people became aware of the serious nature of developments on Aug. 8, when Begum Nusrat Bhutto, mother and close confidante of the prime minister and a senior minister in her cabinet, told a convention in the capital Islamabad that the prime minister could not come to speak as planned, "as she has convened a very important meeting concerning the security of the country and democracy."

It was a reference to Miss Bhutto's critical meeting with Chief of Army Staff Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg. Prior to that, it has been reported, the prime minister had canceled previously scheduled trips to the South Asian countries and the Non-Aligned summit in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and sent a signal to the pillars of the Pakistani establishment that if she was not allowed to work as the country's legitimately elected prime minister, she was ready to step down and go to the people for a fresh mandate. By thus raising the stakes, Prime Minister Bhutto managed to stave off the crisis for the time being. But, there is no indication that the pressure against her will be lifted in the near future.

There is no doubt that a section of the Pakistani establishment is inclined to test and "break" Bhutto, fearful as they are that she may break out of the controls imposed as a

condition of her assuming the prime ministership last December. Though the PPP is by far the single largest political party in Pakistan—having won nearly twice the number of seats as the opposition Islamic Jamhuri Ittehad (IJI) in the November election—still the PPP does not enjoy the absolute single-party majority that would have made Bhutto's government far less vulnerable to the type of mischief and destabilization operations recently unleashed.

A disgruntled and jealous establishment is not the only factor in the growing challenge to the government of Benazir Bhutto. The Muslim orthodoxy (the "Islam Pasands," in the words of the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir's father), the drug mafia, the International Monetary Fund, and the disillusioned Afghan rebels are all playing their parts in adding fuel to the fire.

Breaking the controls

In significant part, the present campaign against the PPP government is a measure of Miss Bhutto's courage and determination in exercising leadership commensurate with her responsibilities as prime minister. Fighting the drug mafia, a top priority of the PPP government, is one area where her initiative has drawn blood. To start with, the PPP government set up a ministerial post in the cabinet for the anti-drug fight, and took measures to clean up the badly corrupted Pakistan Narcotics Control Board (PNCB), the country's main drug enforcement agency. Then 35 major drug networks operating in Pakistan were identified, and steps taken to round them up.

In the recent months, some "big fish" have been netted, not the least of which is one Haji Iqbal Beg of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Haji Iqbal Beg's case is a vivid example of the power of the drug mafia. Beg, whose name figures in almost every international drug enforcement agency's notebook, has been shipping heroin to the West from his native region for years. There is not a semblance of doubt that Haji Iqbal Beg was protected in this by Lt. Gen. Fazle Haq (ret.), the former Chief Minister of the NWFP and a stalwart in the late President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq's inner circle. Fazle Haq, often described as "King of the Frontier," and his brother, Fazle Hussain, a fixture on the narcotics traffickers list of the international police agency Interpol,

were named in an *EIR* exposé as early as 1981. Fazle Haq was arrested recently, to the picque of the opposition leaders, for masterminding the July 1988 murder of a Shi'ite leader in Peshawar—but not before he gave an interview to the *Herald* “predicting” another imposition of martial law.

The connection between Beg and the Pakistani establishment is clear in other ways, too. Following issuance of the order for his arrest, Beg disappeared—first in the tribal agencies of the NWFP bordering Afghanistan, where the Pakistan government's writ is on paper only. When the government managed to ferret him out, Beg appeared suddenly in Punjab, headquarters of the opposition to the Bhutto government. Beg had reportedly lodged in a Lahore hotel under the supervision of opposition politicians. Interestingly, Beg himself has reported that he has been warned not to “name names.”

Going for the jugular of the drug trade is not the only PPP initiative that has raised the establishment's ire. Bhutto's decision in May to transfer Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Chief Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul met with anger in Pakistan and some quarters of Washington, D.C. as well. Gul, who was duly promoted prior to his transfer, was a Zia appointee carrying out Afghan resistance operations on the ground, mostly in defiance of the policies dictated by the Pakistan Foreign Office and Prime Minister's Office. At the top of a bevy of hand-picked Zia men, General Gul's control was so complete that his successor, Maj. Gen. Shamsur Rehman Kallou (ret.), named by Prime Minister Bhutto, has found himself virtually isolated. There are rumors now that Kallou is ready to step down.

Bhutto's encroachment on the Army preserve did not end with Gul's removal. In July, the prime minister tried in vain to retire the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Adm. Iftikhar Ahmed Sirohey, another Zia appointee. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan countermanded the prime minister's order, and reinstated Sirchey for another two years on the strength of the powers granted him by the controversial Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. Besides triggering a debate about who has the authority to hire and fire the joint chiefs, the President-Prime Minister confrontation sparked speculation about how long Bhutto would last. Rumors flew fast and thick that the establishment had had enough of the democratic government, and that the demise of the PPP administration was in sight.

The speculation was not wholly without foundation. The President's dramatic use of his Eighth Amendment powers was not accidental. The controversial amendment, which gives the President complete power to sack any duly elected government without consulting anyone—not even the National Assembly—was grafted onto the 1973 Constitution by the late President Zia ul-Haq and his handpicked *shoora* (council of advisers) to consolidate power in his own hands during the martial law regime. As members of the PPP administration have acknowledged, the amendment is an important control point for the establishment. But, it will lapse



Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto is under siege from the political establishment, the Muslim orthodoxy, the drug mafia, and the International Monetary Fund. She has survived this round, but the war is not over.

on March 20, 1990.

Iqbal Ahmed Khan, the Muslim League Secretary General and Zia ul-Haq's Law Minister, the man who piloted the Eighth Amendment through the National Assembly, said at a public rally recently that the PPP government would be gone before March 20 next year.

Bigotry and opportunism

In her battle for political survival, Miss Bhutto cannot count on support from the Muslim orthodoxy, which has shown itself to be putty in the hands of the gaggle of individuals known as the opposition, whose political careers consist in having been the fig-leaves for a military dictatorship, and who now resent their loss of status. The scene at the Shah Faisal Mosque on Aug. 17, the first anniversary of the death of President Zia, was a clear indication. On the same day, at the Badshah Mosque in Lahore, Maulana Abdul Qadir Azad, who is on government payroll and who was warned in advance not to politicize his eulogy, launched a tirade against “the woman ruler.” Said the Maulana: “Cruel people eliminated him [President Zia] and thrust on us a woman as a ruler.”

It would be naive to believe the Iman's outburst was an isolated excrescence. The mullahs' mobilization is evident in the realm of Indo-Pakistani ties, one of their favorite issues. Every single move Prime Minister Bhutto has made so far to lay the foundation for a civil relationship with India has come under ritual attack—almost in the form of wailing. The Amir of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, Qazi Hussain Ahmad, has accused Bhutto of “selling off” Pakistan to India. Among the

mullahs' accusations against the PPP administration is the charge of a "secret plot" to concede to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on the province of Kashmir, and of "ignoring Pakistan's interests in her zeal to improve relations with India."

The "Islam Pasands" already showed their muscle in March, when they took 10,000 people out into the streets of Islamabad, ostensibly to protest the Americans' decision to reprint the book *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie (which had long been banned in Pakistan). The mullahs managed to turn the procession violent and extract some political mileage out of the show.

Use of the mullahs by the IJI has had its ramifications outside of Pakistan, too. It is well known that Bhutto's accession to power was seen with jaundiced eyes by at least some in Saudi Arabia and by orthodox Muslims elsewhere in the Islamic world. Inside Pakistan, the combination of the Jamaat and establishment politicians from the Muslim League is now delving into the volatile Sindh situation, according to reports, to harass the PPP government and Miss Bhutto in her home political base.

Flashpoint Sindh

Meanwhile, Sindh, whose major city Karachi has become the center of the heroin trade, has become close to ungovernable. In cities like Karachi and Hyderabad, the Mohajir Qaum Movement, a non-political grouping of the Mohajirs, continues to rule the roost. The demand of the Mohajirs—those who migrated from India to Pakistan since the formation of Pakistan in 1947—is to be recognized as the fifth "nationality" of Pakistan, alongside the Punjabis, the Pathans, the Sindhis, and the Baluchis. As immigrants were faced with the hostility of local Sindhis, the Mohajirs organized themselves into a well-knit group, and today have become highly militant, and are itching for a fight to establish their supremacy.

Since Sindh is also the prime political base of the PPP, the tussle for supremacy in Karachi—the most populous and commercially most important city in Pakistan—between these two groups has created chaos. Arrayed against the embattled PPP and Mohajirs alike are the Sindh separatists, who were cultivated by the late President Zia to weaken the PPP he feared and abhorred. This dangerous game of political opportunism over the years created other Frankenstein monsters, such as the Punjabi-Pakhtoon Ittehad. The PPI is led by one Ghulam Sarwar Awan, a demagogue who openly promotes violence to establish the rights of the minority group he claims to represent. There are indications that Awan, whose group could not win a single seat it contested in the last elections, is backed by the establishment politicians from Punjab.

According to the Pakistani media, a meeting between President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Ghulam Sarwar Awan took place recently. Following the meeting, Awan issued a

number of statements on behalf of the President which were neither denied nor confirmed. It is not clear why the President would have chosen to meet this insignificant politician: Since Awan does not have any base in Sindh, it is implausible that the President was motivated by a desire to resolve the Sindh crisis. Most likely, the aim was less noble.

International bankers' concern

An indicator of the speed with which things are moving was the Sept. 16 statement of Gen. Aslam Beg to newsmen in Islamabad. The general, who has so far meticulously avoided political matters, vented his anguish at "certain internal political developments, particularly the ongoing ethnic and regional violence in Sindh and the tussle between the federal and Punjab government."

General Beg's speech followed a Sept. 11 report in the daily *The Muslim*, that the World Bank mission led by Luis de Azoarate had told Pakistan's Finance Minister Ehasanul Haq Piracha in early September that the bank was concerned about the Karachi situation, and had asked for a report from the government. Earlier, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had also shown similar concern about Karachi and the drop in industrial production. According to the daily, it is the first time an international organization is believed to have asked for a report on the domestic security situation.

But if law and order is bad, the state of the Pakistani economy is worse. The PPP government inherited a bankrupt treasury; worse, the nation's sovereignty had been handed over to the IMF just months before the PPP took over. As in other cases, the IMF has strong prescriptions for Pakistan. Electricity rates have just been raised by 11.6%—and that, as Prime Minister Bhutto explained in a speech announcing the measure, was the result of a fight against the IMF demand for a 17% hike, which had been accepted by the Zia regime.

More socially chaotic prescriptions are now being prepared, in the wake of the IMF mission's month-long visit in August. The coming measures reportedly include a "substantial" increase in the average price of petroleum, which is going to affect all productive sectors and raise the price of almost all merchandise. The IMF also insists that the domestic sale price of imported fertilizers be raised by October, and has told the PPP government to raise the wheat procurement price in October.

On the expenditure side, it is all austerity. The IMF wants Pakistan to curtail federal spending. Among the suggested measures are restriction of employment expansion and control of the public sector wage bill. The IMF has also advised that vacancies caused by retirement are not to be filled. In the name of budget balancing, the IMF is decreeing that the programs for employment expansion and poverty alleviation that were an important part of the PPP's electoral platform must be delayed, if not abandoned altogether. This is a prescription for social chaos, and perhaps even the death of the newly won democratic institutions.